



ARTISTS AS PLANNERS: ART-FORCE’S CROSS-CURRENTS CONFERENCE

ART + PLANNING + POLICY

JANET KAGAN

Janet is Founding Director of Art-Force Incorporated, a 501c3 non-profit tax-exempt organization. She serves on the Placemaking Leadership Council; numerous committees of national and regional arts organizations; artist and grant selection panels and juries; and as Associate Editor of the International Journal of the Arts in Society. Janet was Board Chair of the Public Art Network (PAN) of Americans for the Arts and Board Chair of the Chapel Hill Public Arts Commission. Janet holds an MBA from Simmons School of Management and an MA in Philosophy of Art from Duke University.

Art-Force Incorporated (art-force.org) is a non-profit tax-exempt 501c3 organization that stimulates and diversifies socio-economic development and community well-being in rural and distressed areas. As civic curators, we revitalize and transform places through physical and cultural investment. The Art-Force Community Institute annually produces a national collaboratory convention called Cross-Currents, focusing on the intersection of the arts and a sector often not affiliated with the arts. In 2015, Art + Leadership Powering Rural Economies was held in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. In association with the City of Rocky Mount and the Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences, we redefined civic leadership in the context of artistic power, repositioning the role of creatives as community visionaries addressing socio-economic issues.

Creatives are highly-trained thinkers whose work and impact extends beyond the studio; America’s cities and towns desperately need these powerful imaginations to enhance the well-being, pride, and shared identity of their communities. Cross-Currents: Art + Leadership Powering Rural Economies was designed as a sort of “jumper-cable,” a spark to help planners answer seminal questions about

why and how creatives should be formally integrated into civic planning and policy agendas. The convention bridged the gap between these disparate parties in order to foster mutual understanding and appreciation. Civic leaders gained exposure to how creative minds approach problems—the questions they ask, the assumptions they make, and the rigor they bring as agents of change.

Art + Leadership was organized around four fundamental pillars of community development: creative infrastructure; entrepreneurship; research, theory, and practice; and physical infrastructure. Artists along with participants representing community development corporations; foundations; research and policy institutions; rural practitioners and leaders; entrepreneurial initiatives; municipal, state, and federal agencies; and nonprofit organizations explored how artists uniquely produce innovative strategies for community economic revitalization.

Scaffolding Political, Creative, Economic, and Social Power

Despite everyone seeming to know one another, there is a surprising lack of internal coordination within many small towns. While in many cases this is due to single individuals being responsible for multiple roles, this disconnect manifests as a void in broad strategic planning. Remarking on this condition, Jennifer Rankin, the co-organizer of Cross-Currents, bemoaned the lack of communication. She stated, “So many people are doing so many things but nothing is synced. These individuals and organizations are trying to ‘grow’ but using only their puzzle pieces without glancing at all the elements. Having everyone at the table is key to the success of revitalizing and transforming a community.” In the hopes of ameliorating this blockage,

Art-Force offers itself as “creative scaffolding and infrastructure that supports the invention and imagination necessary for creative readiness—a willingness to be vulnerable to the unknown.”

Art-Force invited four creatives who understood the culture of rural North Carolina to be in-residence throughout Cross-Currents. A photographer, public artist, architect, and landscape designer collaborated with attendees in all sessions to nudge participants toward that which was daring, sometimes counterintuitive, and always provocative. At the request of Rocky Mount’s Downtown Development Office, they also applied “design thinking” to downtown and the empty buildings along several blocks of East and West Main Street.

Their job was not to make art but, rather, to make an artful community.

Rocky Mount’s Main Street is a complex site. It is a corridor of long blocks and a street of extraordinary width due to the busy Amtrak rail line that runs down its center. The train terminal is at one end adjacent to an underutilized public park bracketed by a residential neighborhood. This downtown corridor also negotiates the geopolitical boundary between Nash and Edgecombe counties, complicating funding appropriations and governance due to an otherwise invisible demarcation. While significant facade improvements have been completed along Main Street, most properties remain vacant.

The downtown design charrette brought creative approaches into the economic revitalization and redevelopment equation. Conference participants

and residents worked shoulder-to-shoulder with this design team tackling planning and policy from alternative perspectives. Architect Ellen Cassilly, landscape architect Kofi Boone, photographer Burk Uzzle, and public artist Laurel Holtzapple led thinking and ideation through drawings, discussion, and evaluation. The artists and designers explored how to activate downtown, where to distinguish between arts programming and cultural infrastructure, when to initiate implementation of recommendations, and who might be the appropriate collaborators and partners to realize these plans.

Ellen Cassilly reflected, “As an architect and community planner, [I always ask] what are the missing links that a small town needs to consider to start or jumpstart revitalization? In this case, what does Rocky Mount need to do next and how can we, as designers and artists, contribute to that goal?”

The team thoughtfully considered past municipal investments and future sidewalk/streetscape renovation. But their core question was: what physical and creative infrastructure is necessary to activate downtown street life and how should it be designed. According to resident real estate developer Vann Joines, “Deciding how to efficiently navigate complex financial, zoning, regulatory, and life-safety considerations dominates how communities are built. These decisions, though, do not facilitate the development of a unique place.” The design team was therefore mindful that physical recommendations would need to be conceived in the contexts of departmental budgets, staff expertise, existing building stock, approved master plans, and funding proposals.

The team proposed many original ideas for public space

activation. These proposals included a Thelonious Monk Garden, an homage to the jazz musician who was born in Rocky Mount; an outdoor movie space; a one-mile walking loop with spurs into adjoining streets; bike rentals, tire pumps, and tool repair stations; connected waterways and buildings; an activated alley; video “ArtPauses” at each train crossing along Main Street; and a gateway between downtown and the new community college building. Each project was sketched and organized by priority for impementation.

The ideas that came out of this convening were well-received by planners and other participants. John Jesso, the Rocky Mount Downtown Development Manager, affirmed that “Downtowns are unique in that they are typically the only neighborhood that belongs to everyone. The charrette promoted broad revitalization through artistic measures and strategies that emphasized creativity.”

Conclusions: Fundamental Frameworks for Community Development

Many of us speak with a dialect that facilitates our professional work and articulates shared assumptions and understandings. In his book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond argues that groups tend to “flail and fail” when they approach new problems with old strategies attempting to create order out of chaos by repeating predictable behaviors even as conditions change. Creatives challenge this modus operandi, which is why creative processes can be messy and why artists are frequently perceived as deviant or threatening. However, questioning established protocols can facilitate new directions. In planning, partnering with creatives inevitably illuminates alternatives to current conditions.



An idea drawn for a site in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Courtesy of Art-Force

Like cities and towns, creatives must be profitable to survive and, like other residents and businesses, choose where they want to live and work. How can we make room for artists and creative processes when agencies too often operate with objectives that are linear for enforcement? How do we make space for risk-taking and for unexpected leaders? To answer this question, planners should look internally: Are your department’s regulations prohibiting more creative and inventive responses to civic and community agendas? Which policies and guidelines need revision or modification?

Jen Hughes, Design Specialist at the National Endowment for the Arts, stated, “Rural America is undergoing a profound economic restructuring. Many small towns have turned to their cultural and arts assets as sources of new economic development and as hooks for retaining

and recruiting young talent. What impressed me [at Cross-Currents] the most was the diversity of participants. It is no small feat to bring such a varied group together and to foster such rich dialogue. Conferences like this are invaluable for the arts and culture field. They unleash new ideas for other sectors to incorporate artists, civic entrepreneurs, and creatives in reimagining cities and towns and contributing new approaches to address age-old problems.”

